

Pages of History - Contribution of the Kuka movement to the anti-colonial struggle

S S Azad

The Kuka movement of 1871 centred in Punjab remains, to this day, an inspiration for revolutionaries and patriots.

Brief history of the Kuka movement

Writing about the Kuka movement, Shahid Bhagat Singh says, “Kukas who were called foolish and misguided are a sect of Sikhs called Namdhari or Kuka. Its founder Guru Ram Singhji was a militant revolutionary, an outstanding patriot and a social reformer who prepared for large scale revolt against foreign rule. They were not foolish, but they were so imbued with patriotism that standing in front of the cannons, they laughed, screamed and shouted Sat Sri Akal”.

Satguru Ram Singh was born in February 1824 in village Raiyan, Ludhiana. His father was Baba Jassa Singh and mother was Mata Sada Kaur. They were blacksmiths by profession. The family was very religious and had influenced young Ram Singh. From his childhood he was imbued with Sikh values. In 1837 he joined Kunwar Nau Nihal Singh's regiment in Ranjit Singh's army.

After the demise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh raj was weakened considerably and the British used their cunning policy of divide and rule to divide the Sikhs. Due to various conspiracies and internal rivalries among the Sikh commanders the Khalsa Army became very weak. Finally the Sikh Raj collapsed. In 1845 Guru Ram Singh left the army since he had fully recognised the situation in it. According to Ajit Singh Namdhari, “The Sikh elite had degenerated and had become subservient to the British while oppressing the poor Sikh peasantry”.

During this period Guru Ram Singh went back to his village and continued his family profession, while continuing to propagate the message of Sikhism. He did this for 12 years. The atrocities committed by the British led to an increase in the followers of Guru Ram Singh. In 1857 he moved to Bhaini Wala in Ludhiana which is now called Bhaini Sahab. Here he established his sect. As a guru he used to initiate his followers into the sect which came to be known as Namdhari sect. Namdharis were told to wear white dress, white turban and white woollen garland. Each Namdhari was required to lead a simple life, meditate regularly, rise above casteism, abstain from intoxicants and meat, engage in a profession and share the fruits of his labour with others. The Guru's orders had to be strictly followed.

To emancipate the women, he banned sati and the veil and encouraged widow remarriage, called for the boycott of those who engaged in female infanticide and prohibited child marriages. He ended the practice of ostentatious marriages and propagated that a marriage should be organised in less than one and a quarter rupees. He also

encouraged inter-caste marriages and banned usury. He encouraged girls' education. Due to such social reforms more and more people were attracted to his sect. At the same time there was strong opposition from conservative Sikh priests, who saw their grip over the masses declining. They started complaining to the British that Ram Singh was a rebel who was preaching sedition. The Namdhari sect had foreseen this danger and started contacting other patriotic rebel groups. According to Shahid Bhagat Singh, "it is said that an unknown sanyasi, Ram Das, had said, 'at this time to get rid of foreign rule is the highest duty of all his followers'". Guru Ram Singh started preparing for a more active struggle for national liberation. When the British got a whiff of this they banned the Namdhari Sangathan in 1863 which continued till 1867. But the patriotic activity of the Namdharis never stopped even in those difficult conditions.

In 1867 along with the open practice of social reforms, an underground organisation was also set up with the aim of overthrowing British rule. Complete boycott of foreign goods and jobs in the British administration and boycott of British educational institutions and courts was already in force. To make it more effective, panchayats were set up to deal with administrative and judicial matters. Railways and Post and Telegraphs were boycotted and instead an indigenous postal service was established. Wearing traditional weapons like swords was encouraged. To spread the message, 22 subehs were established and each one was headed by a namdhari. Arms training was imparted in the nights and a regular namdhari platoon was established in Jammu and Kashmir. The guru also sent emissaries to Russia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and France, and tried to establish relations with them. Contacts were also established with various princes and pundits to fight the British. However, before the plan could bear fruit, the British organised provocations. Some hotheads got provoked by these acts, thereby prematurely exposing the preparation for the uprising. The cunning British rulers, in order to incite religious sentiments, encouraged the establishment of slaughterhouses next to Namdhari dharamshalas and Hindu and Sikh religious places. This was bound to lead to a reaction. Some jathas of the Namdhari sangathan took up the issue of opposing the slaughterhouses as their main task.

On the night of 14-15 June 1871, Namdhari Sikhs raided the slaughterhouse in Amritsar in the night, and the second raid was launched on the Raikot slaughterhouse. The British government which did not expect the attack was taken aback. The police arrested a few Hindus and Sikhs and tortured them to give a false confession as they do today too. When the namdhari jatha told the truth to Guru Ram Singh he told them to surrender and save the innocents. Accordingly the attackers surrendered before the magistrate and accepted their deed. This led to the downturn in the Kuka movement. In the Amritsar case four Namdharis viz. Behla Singh, Hakim Singh Patwari, Lehna Singh and Fateh Singh Bhatra were hanged on 15 September 1871 and three more were sent to the Andamans. In the Raikot case, Subah Gyani Ratan Singh and Sant Ratan Singh were hanged from the banyan tree outside the Ludhiana central jail.

The bloody saga of Maler Kotla

After these atrocities on their comrades, Namdharis became even more determined to fight and they organised a squad of 150 fighters which included two women also. The squad attacked collaborators of the British and refused to heed the advice of their guru. On the evening of 14 January 1872, they went to the ruler of Mallaod and pressed him to join them. But he flatly refused, which led to a fight between the Namdharis and his army in which four people were killed and four Namdharis were captured and handed over to the British.

The next day the squad entered Maler Kotla principality whose ruler was also a British stooge. They entered through Dhabingate shouting slogans. This led to commotion in the durbar of the local ruler. In the battle that ensued between the squad and the ruler's army, both sides suffered heavy casualties. Seven Namdharis lost their lives and five who were injured were captured. The remaining squad left the place taking away arms and horses from the ruler. The enemy followed them, while the squad hid in the thick jungles of Rarh. The Maler Kotla army along with that of the ruler of Sherpur, encircled them. Another battle ensued. Despite being weary, injured, hungry and thirsty, the Namdharis fought valiantly. Sixty seven of them were captured. They were brought to Maler Kotla while the two women fighters were handed over to the ruler of Patiala because they hailed from that area. The British Commissioner of Ludhiana also reached there along with his captain. The Deputy Commissioner of Maler Kotla, Mr Cowan, and decided to put them to death without the formalities of a trial. On 17 January, 1872 nine cannons were brought from Patiala, Nabha and Jind to the parade ground of Maler Kotla. Thousands of people from the surrounding villages were herded into the maidan to witness the brutal execution of the rebels in order to instil fear in them. However, when the captured Kukas were brought to the ground they were defiantly shouting slogans against the British and their stooges. They welcomed their martyrdom with smiling faces. The Deputy Commissioner ordered them to be blown from the mouth of a cannon. The kukas insisted that they did not need to be tied and they would go and stand in front of the mouths of the cannons willingly. They started a full throated singing of:

Sura so pehachaniye jo lade deen ke het, Purja, purja kat mare, kabon na chhode khet.

(The fighter for the cause will not leave the battlefield even if he is cut into small pieces)

Witnessing this bravery the crowd gathered was charged with patriotic emotion and shouted vigorously slogans in their support. It became a problem to control the people. At this the British went berserk and fired the cannons, blowing up 49 patriots.

There were two young Namdharis aged about 9 and 12, Harnam Singh and Bishen Singh. DC Cowan's wife requested that pity be shown to them and that they be released. DC Cowan

told them, “Declare that you are not followers of Guru Ram Singh and I will spare your lives.” Twelve year old Bishen Singh requested that he be allowed to say something privately to Cowan. When the DC brought his ear close to the kid, Bishen Singh caught hold of his beard and said, “How dare you say that!” and bit his ear. Seeing this turn of events, the guards cut off the head of Bishen Singh.

The remaining 16 Namdharis were blown up the next day in secret without the crowd. The brave 9 year old Harnam Singh sat on his uncle’s shoulders and both stood in front of the cannon.

British rulers used all the tricks in their trade to suppress the Kuka movement. While the Kuka rebels were being blown up with cannons on Jan 17-18, one hundred and seventy two Kukas along with Guru Ram Singh were arrested. Fifty of them were sent to jail. Satguru Ram Singh was taken to Allahabad by a special train and on 10 March, 1872 was exiled and imprisoned in Rangoon, Burma. The Guru tried to keep contact with his followers through messengers. As a result the British further isolated him by sending him to an island off Burma and it was announced that he had died on Nov 29, 1885. However the sect refused to believe it. It is said that from the island he escaped to another country. Many of those who were arrested along with him died in the jails.

The Kuka movement has continued to inspire generations of revolutionaries and patriots to this day.

The author S S Azad is a well known political activist from Punjab. He has also published a popular book in Punjabi on the life and work of Shahid Bhagat Singh